

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

An Online
Magazine of
Literary
Adventure
Fantasy



Issue #212 • Nov. 10, 2016

[“The Aeroliths,” by Stephen Case](#)

[“The Uncarved Heart,” by Evan Dicken](#)

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THE AEROLITHS

by Stephen Case

One night there was a storm, a big one that raged through the windows of the wizard's house and set it swaying at anchor in the sky over the Emperor's ivory city. I had not spoken the word to close the heavy copper shutters. (I admit that for a time I could not recall what the word was.) Some scrolls were torn from their places in the upper levels, and the next morning I found them scattered about the stone floor like leaves.

This one was among them.

Sylva wanted me to find it.

"Your name is a lie," Sylva had told me, before she departed and took the winds, leaving the wizard's house silent and becalmed.

"I am the wizard Theodulus now," I said. "I wear his cloak. I bear his ring. I know the words of power."

But I did not know the words to either free her or compel her.

"His name was a lie."

She would not explain what she meant.

I knew she had been bound to this house to serve the wizard, as she served me now who had taken his place. But when the house returned to the Emperor's capital and I had taken the wizard's name, Sylva laughed once, harshly, and departed.

Now I waited for her return.

The scroll is coiled and damp with tears or rain or both. For Sylva, they might be one and the same.

She is the wind.

She has gone again, out in the empty blue beyond the windows, though she cannot go far, bound as she is to the house.

As the sunlight slants through the tall windows I spread the wet parchment across my knees and speak a fire into the hearth.

"Your name is a lie," I hear her say again.

I bend and begin to read.

* * *

There had been in my great-grandfather's day no rebellion, yet when the Emperor came to power the patricians opposed him in their own way. Emperor Theodorus, they said, did not wish to begin his reign in blood, so he banished all the noble houses to the mountain valleys of the north to mine the aeroliths.

We found our nine-hundredth aerolith that spring. I was wandering the lower slopes when I heard the sharp high cry of my eldest brother's horn signal a find. When I arrived, my father and brothers were already there, chipping away the rock face at the sharp mouth of a gully.

"A shallow one, Sylva," the youngest of my brothers said when I joined them. "Not far from the surface."

He pointed to where a few slivers of rock drifted upward in the breeze.

By law no more than three aeroliths could be stored together outside the Emperor's own storehouses. There were two of the stones in our lodge already, tugging at their leather straps in my father's workroom like docked barges on a river. This find would mean, after it was fully unearthed and shaped, a trip to Cor Capitulus.

I told my father I was old enough to come with him.

"No," he said. Then he sighed. "Not yet. Not this time. Soon."

He had taken my brothers before. But I was different. I could tease motion from the buoyant flecks carved from the corners of the aeroliths. I had always known the coming weather from the mute breezes gusting at the valley's edge.

And I was his only daughter.

I did not realize then what that meant.

Mother must have had words with him, though I never learned what they were. The next evening, as my brothers and father returned from the day's work with the fully unearthed aerolith trailing behind them, she told me that when the stone was shaped I would travel with him to the Capital.

The stones gained potency as they were shaped. My father chipped and shaved at the rock—tethered now to the floorboards of the workshop—until it was the size dictated by the golden rods my great-grandfather had carried from Cor Capitolus: a length of nearly my father's full outspread arms, and a height and width of half that. By the time it was finished, my father and brothers could all sit astride the grey carved boulder where it floated a few feet above the wooden floor and it would hardly settle at all toward the ground.

Two other stones were nestled against the rafters of the workshop. They would be winched down and, along with this one, fastened to a large wooden sledge of my father's design, built so ordinary stones could be loaded into its bottom half. When the weight was balanced perfectly, a single mule could pull the buoyant sledge down out of the valley, with my father and whichever son he had chosen to accompany him riding on top.

This time it would be me.

Had I known what waited for me there though, what words would pass between the Emperor and his wizard upon my entrance to the Blue Hall, I would not have been so eager for the journey.

* * *

We saw the low white line of the walls of Cor Capitolus not long after lunch on our second day out of the mountains. Truthfully though, as my father explained, we were not out of the mountains at all. The wide, green fields we rode through were a valley, though one so large the mountains were simply now a low line on the horizon. The ranges continued to the south, he said, before falling away to vast red deserts. Even those did not mark the edge of the Emperor's domains, which extended to the immense mesas of the far south known as the Shallows, where the Barons waged their petty wars.

When we were within sight of the walls my father pulled a wrapped parcel from beneath the sledge. Unwrapping it, I saw it was a blue robe I had never seen him wear before, with stiff bronze epaulets at the shoulders.

He saw my questioning look.

"The mark of a patrician," he explained. "And one I am permitted to wear within sight of the city." He climbed down from the sledge. "We walk from here."

The Emperor's Capital, in my father's words, was a city of green boulevards and canals spilling out along either side of the River Is. The white walls resolved as we approached into monoliths of marble, huge vertical slabs rearing upward at regular intervals along the city's perimeter, but no more a true wall than a row of ivory headstones. No army had ever marched across the Emperor's plains.

"Not in the ages of the patricians," my father said, pointing up at the stones as we passed between them. "Nor in the age that followed."

We walked between them and led the mule and the floating sledge down a wide smooth avenue leading to the center of the city. Traffic parted on either side around us, and the mounted soldiers we passed periodically gave respectful salutes, which my father returned. At the beginning of a row of huge houses along a wide blue canal, my father turned the sledge down an equally wide side street.

We stopped at a set of bronze doors set in the face of a windowless stone warehouse.

"This is the Hall of Delivery," my father explained.

He knocked, and the doors swung open silently.

He unhitched the sledge from the mule, and a team of men came from within and pulled the sledge inside. I followed my father after them. They pushed it to the center of an immense

chamber, darkened but for where a central beam of light came down from windows high above. At the center of this chamber, a man in a long grey robe waited beside an immense coil of chain.

“Patrician,” the man said in greeting when we stood before him. He bowed, and my father bowed back.

“I bring these gifts to the Emperor.”

“The Emperor is grateful.” There was a narrow desk beside the man, upon which sat a huge ledger, quill, and silver and gold rods identical to those in my father’s workshop. The man applied these rods to the stones we had carried from the mountains, nodding approvingly and making notations in his ledger.

“And now their buoyancy,” he said.

My father bent to affix the huge chain to the bottom of the sledge.

“Stand back,” he told me.

He hit an iron lever on the side of the sledge that dropped the ballast stones from the lower half. Like a cork released in water, the sledge with its three secured stones lurched upward. The clerk read off measurements from the chain as it spiraled upward until the sledge and stones slowed to a halt far over our heads in a beam of sunlight above .

“These may be your strongest yet, Patrician,” the man said with what sounded like true mirth. “The blood runs strong in your hills.”

My father grunted but said nothing. The clerk made some final notations in his ledger and closed it in satisfaction.

“Your family’s debt to the Emperor is nine-tenths paid, Patrician.” At this it was my father’s turn to bow again. The clerk’s eyes fell on me. “You bring a new member of your family to court this season.”

“This is my daughter, Sylva.”

The man’s smile widened, and he pulled a bronze instrument from within a fold of his robe. I felt my father stiffen beside me, but it was simply a wide-faced timepiece. He clicked it open and stared. I could not see its face.

“Wonderful,” he said after a moment. “It pleases me the patrician families prosper, even in exile.”

With that we were dismissed. I stared upward again at the far reaches of the room. Our stones seemed bricks against the vastness of the chamber’s wide vaults. I realized our own were suspended among many, that there were dozens of floating stones in the upper chamber.

My father’s gaze followed mine. “This is where they are all delivered, from all the patrician holdings. When enough are

collected, they'll be carried to the Emperor's quarries in the hills."

"What are they doing with them?"

My father shrugged as we left the room. "It is not for me to know. Come, we will stay in the guesthouse maintained for patricians in exile. It is not far from the palace."

On our walk through the Capital, my eyes wandered upward at the buildings we passed and the empty alleys of air above them. I imagined the Emperor lining his palace with our aeroliths until it rose and drifted over the city like a cloud.

It was not like that at all.

* * *

A runner came to the guesthouse the next morning as my father and I were breakfasting before a long wall of flint-glass windows that looked onto the market square below.

"Your daughter has been summoned for an audience with the Emperor," the runner said. I saw my father's face pale, and his eyes glanced toward me. "He will await her presence in the Blue Hall at four of the clock."

The runner bowed quickly and was gone.

It had been, I believe, my father's plan to deliver the stones and show me—as he had my brothers before me—the holdings beside the river that remained ours by right. I could not read his expression now.

“The Emperor?” I asked.

My father nodded. “Emperor Theodorus, and his twin brother, the wizard Theodulus. I have never met them.” He rubbed at his chin. “I have never been summoned to the palace in all my years in exile. My father saw the Emperor once, but it was years ago. Before I was born.”

“Why does he want to see me?”

Again my father’s eye flicked toward me, but he quickly turned his gaze to the crowds milling in the square beyond the windows. “I don’t know. I don’t know much about them. That is one way the exile has been effective: the patrician families have been removed from the environs of Cor Capitolus. We cannot form alliances. We cannot practice the swift games of politics. We rusticate.”

He sighed heavily.

“We are still of the old blood.” He looked at me again. “The Emperor who reigns now—it is he who exiled your great-grandfather.”

I felt my own eyes widen. “How is that possible?”

“The Emperor and his family are of the purest blood. But another benefit of the exile—” my father inclined his head “—time for anger to cool. I doubt the Emperor wishes to see you to discuss old enmities. They have hobbled the old houses, but

they know they cannot do away with them completely. They need us.”

“Why?”

My father cracked his knuckles and looked uncomfortable. “Come, let’s spend the morning seeing after the estate. We will return for the midday meal and prepare for your meeting at the palace.”

The day passed quickly. We walked through the empty, echoing corridors of my family’s manor. I stared at the crest of three blue feathers that dominated the great hall, while my father talked in low tones with the steward who still lived in the servant’s chambers and coordinated the caretakers. I watched the Is flow by the manicured gardens where my ancestors had walked and dined. Through the wide windows of the manor’s upper levels, I looked for the shape of mountains in the distance, beyond the ivory teeth of the Capital’s broken walls.

I wanted to go home.

* * *

The Emperor at least was kind, though the kindness never left his eyes to touch his words or his visage. I stood alone before the Emperor and his brother in the Blue Hall and felt them weighing my fate.

“Your father will return to the valley of your birth,” he said. He did not raise his voice, but it carried throughout the

Hall. "With our thanks. The exile of your family is nearing an end."

He wore the same face as his brother, the wizard, who stood at his shoulder. In the wizard's eyes though there was a darker hardness. This was the cost, I would learn, of his power. He wore it around him like a weight.

The wizard leaned toward his brother and whispered a single word: "Aeolius."

His voice was an echo of the Emperor's, though edged with a power I could feel along the back of my arms and neck. Something moved beneath the surface of the syllables, waking memories.

I had heard that name before.

An image flared like a candle in my mind, and suddenly I sat once more beside the fire with my grandmother in my parents' lodge in the mountains. My mother was of the shepherd villages that dotted the hills, and for a time when I was young her mother lived with us. I asked her one night about the aeroliths, about whether they had always been found among the stones of the hills.

"Oh, no," she said.

She was smaller than my mother, and grey, though around her eyes and mouth it was possible to see the woman she had

once been. It was also possible, with effort, to see the woman I might one day become.

“They came to be in time before,” she said. “A story all the villages tell, and every village tells it differently. Every mountain valley saw it from a different line of sight.”

“Saw what?”

“The battle. When the last of the sky-giants was killed, the one we called Aeolius the Walker. He had been worshipped. The men who made the stone ruins you see on the peaks would in days of dark summer sacrifice a virgin for the shepherding of the winds, long ago.”

It was impossible to tell whether she spoke from true memory or whether she seasoned her story to fit the glow of the fire and the howl of wind beyond the walls.

“Long ago. The patrician generals had driven him into the hills to die. But he was angry, and he broke their ships like firewood, snapped them like dry bones. His anger made him blind, and a wizard dove from above and drove a sword of lightning through his skull. But he was old, and his age made him weak, so instead of growing another or shaping one for himself of the clouds, he died.

“His body was only air though, so that when it fell it fell forever and is still falling. You feel it when the winds come down off the mountains. But his blood spilled out across all

these valleys, and where it touched the rocks you find the sky-stones.”

My grandmother’s voice faded as the wizard leaned forward and spoke again into his brother’s ear.

The Emperor regarded me from his throne. The ceiling of the Blue Hall arched up around him, with painted clouds adorning the huge pillars and the stones of the dome high above. The wide doors inlaid with azure marble closed this chamber off from the rest of the palace, and me from my father waiting beyond them, like the entrance to a tomb.

“Your exile is at an end.”

He could tell I was frightened. His eyes said that. But they also told me he could offer no words of comfort, that he could not speak to me as he would a child.

“You will remain here.” The Emperor stood. “You will be my brother’s charge. You will be taught. You will be tested.”

He watched me for a moment more, and his eyes said something more as well, but I could not understand them. Then he turned and left me alone with the wizard under the blue dome of painted stone sky.

* * *

“Clouds,” the wizard told me, “are born and wait all their lives for a day such as this.”

We were rising among them in the wizard's tiny skiff. I was sullen. My fear had given way to resignation, but there remained a bitterness against the wizard for the assurance he had that I had indeed become his servant, and for my lack of strength to prevent it. It smouldered inside me like the thunderheads rising on the horizon.

"Clouds are not born," I said.

His face was flint. "They are born," he said. "They are engendered of the sky and of the earth's vapors, the waters, her exhalations."

It was true, but I wasn't going to agree with him. I had seen enough cloudscapes to know they emerged from invisible layers of air like ghosts rising from the surface of a pond. We rode low among them, the wind whipping strands of my hair out of the elaborate braids the Emperor's ladies-in-waiting had arranged earlier that morning.

I missed my father. I had not seen him again since they turned him away at the door to the Blue Hall. Then I had only time to grasp his hand for a moment before the doors opened and I faced the Emperor.

I had not seen them close behind me.

I glanced from the edge of the sky-ship to see if I could spot him—a solitary dot on the auburn thread of the road stretching from the city. The sledge that had brought the

aeroliths to the Capital would be empty, as would my seat beside him.

The wizard spoke a word, and the fire in the central bier of the ship flared. The canvas of the bladder above us flapped, and we rose higher.

The wizard saw my gaze rise as well.

“Primitive,” he said, gesturing toward the gas bladder. “I explain this to my brother. Less efficient than the aeroliths.”

I said nothing.

“Tell me what they are like,” the wizard ordered.

“What?”

“The aeroliths in your valley. How are they discovered? How are they mined?”

“Don’t you know?” I asked.

Only days ago, when we had arrived at the Capital, I would have been horrified to imagine speaking to one of the Emperor’s family in such tones.

His eyes left mine and scanned the clouds we rode among. “I leave Cor Capitulus only by air. I know little of the lands beyond.”

“There are clues,” I explained begrudgingly. I had often scouted our hills and gullies for the stones. “You can recognize a seam, sometimes, if it’s not too deep, by the way the stones

lie. They tilt at unnatural angles. Sometimes they're tethered to the ground by only a slender neck of natural stone."

He nodded.

"We make scrapings," I went on, still sullen but warming to the memories. "If they drift on the wind, you know you've struck near a true aerolith. We—my brothers and my father—will drill a stay into it, and then they'll dig it free."

We were moving so fast the clouds passed us only slowly, rearing and breaking like horses of foam.

"Do you know why the aeroliths are found only in the valleys," he asked, "and not on the plains or near Cor Capitulus?"

I nodded again. "My grandmother told me stories. Legends."

He pulled the tiller, lowering a gossamer sweep that caught the wind and turned us in a broad rising arch toward an approaching wall of clouds, the thunderheads I had seen earlier.

"Legends," he said, "are only deep history." He was a wizard, so his words were clear and audible, even in the howling of the wind, even when almost whispered.

We flew on in silence.

The wall of clouds reared higher, like a cliff of broken white, the sun lost behind it. The wind, which we had ridden on earlier, was now cold and biting as we turned into it.

I had never seen clouds like this. I had seen them from the ground and wondered what it must like to be among them. But here were mountains of cloud, growing and shifting, that dwarfed any mountain below.

“This is the cloud-wall,” the wizard said. “Hold the sweeps steady.”

He pushed the tiller into my hands and walked to the prow. By now the clouds were so close I had lost all sense of scale. It was as though we were approaching a wall of fog.

I heard the word the wizard spoke, but I did not understand it. The force of it crackled in the air around us, hanging for a moment like a curtain, and then the clouds responded. A long shaft opened in the white wall. The ship slipped along it, and the clouds reared up on either side as though we sailed a narrow canyon.

“There are faces!” I shouted.

There were visages in the clouds. Or they *were* the clouds. They were watching as we passed, but they seemed to fall away, dissolving into cloudscape, as soon as I noticed.

I thought again of my grandmother’s stories of the sky-giants.

“They are *anima*,” the wizard said. “Spirits of the air. They are tethered here as guardians.”

“They’re angry,” I said.

“They are jealous.”

Soon we were past the broiling walls of white and into a hollow open to the sky but still surrounded by clouds. At its center floated a structure of stone. The boat lifted closer, and I saw that it was a narrow tower set on a carved platform of pale stones.

“The aeroliths,” I breathed.

He nodded.

There were men working on the outside of the structure. As we approached I could see they were stonecarvers, shaping the exterior with chisels and hammers.

“The winds surrounding my house,” the wizard said as we approached it, “are treacherous. You must know not only the word to part the cloud-walls but also the pathway through the labyrinth of wind that surrounds it.”

He was telling me there was no escape.

When the ship was close enough, the wizard gestured and a silver rope snaked from the vessel and tied itself to the edge of the stone platform. Stepping off the ship was like stepping onto firm ground.

The house hung solid and heavy in the sky.

I had arrived at my prison.

* * *

When we entered the house, I gasped. My eyes followed the circular line of the wall, but instead of the sloping ceiling of the tower above, I saw layer upon layer of balconies rising upward to be lost in a grey haze of distance. The wizard glanced at me before brushing past.

“It is a house of borrowed space,” he said over his shoulder.

There were workers on the inside of the house as well, doing a hundred tasks I couldn’t follow. The tower was a single round room, perhaps a quarter as large as the Blue Hall had been, with stairs running at staggered intervals to the balconies above. A huge circular table was in the middle of the floor, and the wizard walked to this now. A woman, bent and ancient, hovered over a mountain of gears and springs on the table’s surface.

“Will it be ready?” the wizard asked. “It must be the greatest you have ever constructed.”

The woman clucked her tongue and barely glanced up. “It will be everything I have ever constructed.”

Her voice was thick. I heard within it the blow of hammers in caverns far beneath the earth and somehow also the motion of branches in wind.

She met my eyes and smiled.

I followed the wizard to chairs and a cold fireplace at edge of the wide room. There was a tray with a kettle and a few pewter cups, all empty. The wizard took one, stared into it for a moment, and then sipped absently.

“How many gods are there?” he asked me.

My attention was still wandering the interior of the house, continually straying toward the room’s apex, where the rows of balconies stretched away in endless vantage. The staircases connecting each level were tight spirals of carved iron that drew the eye upwards and inwards like the shell of a nautilus.

“I don’t know,” I answered absently.

He set the cup back down on the tray with enough force to startle me. “How many?” he demanded. “What is the name worshipped in your village in the mountains?”

I thought for a moment, confused by his questioning. Father had an old and faded portrait of the Emperor in our lodge, and he would occasionally light a spiral of incense before it. He taught my brothers and me words to say that might have been a prayer. But my mother’s people—the people of the mountains—had a small shrine on the highest peak with a white stone they said was a tooth of the Walker.

I mentioned both to the wizard.

“So it is in all places.” The wizard took his cup again and sipped from it. Steam was rising from it now. “We have as many gods as we have villages, as many pantheons as we have languages. It is inefficient.”

I waited.

“My brother—the Emperor—will never rule a house so divided. Even now the Barons of the south believe they can carve the Shallows into their own holdings.”

He put the cup back on the tray.

“Why am I telling you this?”

I blinked. He was staring at me, waiting for an answer. I could hear workmen calling to each other far above. “I don’t know,” I said again. I looked around the house. “Because I will live here.”

He nodded. “Because you will serve me here.”

“But you haven’t explained anything.”

“One black cloud,” he whispered. “On the horizon. A single black cloud has escaped my weave of molding spells. As below, so it must be above: unity under dominion. Snare it for me. Bring it to heel. That is your test.”

“Why?” I asked.

His smile was empty. “Because you are of the blood.”

Even as he spoke, his image wavered and fell to smoke. I heard movement at the doorway, but by the time I reached it

he was gone, his form a figure on his departing air-ship already being swallowed by distance.

He was a wizard. He had left me, had slipped away, while I thought I still spoke with him.

Around me I heard the continuous sound of workmen chipping and shaping stone and the muttering of the woman bent over her mound of springs and gears, but I was alone in the house.

* * *

I did not know how to catch a cloud. I was imprisoned in a sliver of stone, which was itself cocooned within a hollow of clouds. From the windows of the house I could not even look down on the landscape below, hoping for a glimpse of the valley of my family.

The winds were stagnant and weak.

“You are of the blood,” the old woman said, echoing the wizard. Workmen continued to hammer at the stones of the house, and the balcony upon balcony arched up in an impossible dome over my head, but my mind was a blank.

I watched the old woman work, twisting together braids of copper sheeting and gears. Gear seemed to fit inside gear with the impossible geometry of the house itself.

“Because my father is a patrician,” I muttered. “I am a valuable hostage.”

“Not your father’s blood,” the woman clucked, and a spring within the pile of gears before her clicked in sympathy. “Your mother. You are the wind.”

My grandmother had been able to blow out a fire by flexing her fingers. It had been a trick to impress children, a tiny bit of imprinted magic, nothing more.

There was a candle burning beside her as the woman worked at the clock. I waved at it, but nothing happened.

The old woman smiled.

Something groaned inside the unborn timepiece before her, and the woman sighed. “The black cloud. Come.”

We climbed several sets of stairs, passing men pulling trunks or shelves from places I couldn’t quite see, polishing cabinets, and unpacking crates. None of the men would meet my eyes. They kept their heads bowed and whispered polite words as we passed.

When we reached the upper reaches of the wizard’s house (though there were still balconies fading to haze above), the woman stopped before a wide window that looked out into the boiling white clouds.

“There.” She pointed.

The sun filtered through a thin cap of cirrus above the bowl of clouds the house hung within. It felt as though the house floated in the midst of a chapel of white ivory.

Even as we watched, something passed over the sun and cast the tiny shadow on the wall of cloud before us. I craned my neck and saw a piece of cumulus, thick with rain and shadow, passing haphazardly along the slope of white.

“You must bring it to heel,” the old woman clockmaker said. “It irks the wizard.” She grinned as though we shared a secret. “His hold on the winds is not complete.”

I watched the cloud until it had disappeared from view. Part of me went with it, angry and rebellious.

* * *

I glance up from the scroll. Clouds have risen around the wizard's house like mist, and I hear the faint patter of rain come from somewhere far overhead.

The timepiece ticks softly beside the door, its concentric rings gleaming like coins in the firelight. This was the clock that foretold the wizard's fate, and it still speaks occasionally, though almost always in riddles.

“Who fashioned you?” I ask it.

It chuckles with the sliding of gears.

Something in her account troubles me. The wizard she describes is not the wizard as I recall. He was distant and sometimes harsh, but he was not cruel. He was not so hungry for power.

Time changes things, perhaps, but the wizard kept himself out of the step of time.

No, it is more than that. I feel like I am reading in a mirror, as though something has been reversed.

Sylva's script changes here, growing more hurried, the ink carried across the page as though the strokes are reeds bending in a gale.

* * *

I don't know how to catch a cloud. The wizard grows impatient. He comes to the house in the evenings, bringing orders for the workman and words for the old woman who labors over what is becoming in her hands an infant timepiece. It chirps at her fingers and on occasion whispers.

"You have knowledge of the winds in your veins," the wizard tells me, but I shake my head. Though I am his prisoner, I will not play his games. My father was right to fear bringing me to Cor Capitulus.

"Indeed he was," the wizard says.

The old woman chuckles.

"Let me go home."

"I cannot."

"He hungers for sight," the old woman says later. Springs shudder under her fingers. "He has been promised vision by his brother."

“Vision?”

“His eyes are weak. The Emperor has promised him new vision. Seeing stones.”

“What do they want?” I ask her. I am thinking of the wizard and his twin.

Gears groan and her knuckles crack. “Power,” she says. “The Barons of the south in their wind-ships test the Emperor’s authority. He cannot exercise dominion. He will send his brother when this weapon is completed.”

I stare at the labyrinth of metal at her fingertips. “What are you doing?”

She smiles. It is night, and the candles that line the table make the metal before her gleam like embers. “Giving birth,” she says.

I shake my head. This is house of riddles. Outside the windows there is only blackness. The house—my cage—is itself still enclosed in cloud.

“A single cloud,” the wizard orders again the next morning. He has come to his house early. His tea service is blue silver, and the steam from the cups this morning is thick, wreathing his head. “A single cloud, and you shall have your reward.”

“My freedom?”

He shakes his head. “You will serve me.”

My anger is hot and sudden. The tea, when I throw it toward his face, congeals in the air between us. He watches it without flinching. In another moment it rains down into the kettle.

“You cannot compel me,” I say, though my voice is soft. I would make it harder, but there seems no point.

“He would take you for a wife,” the old woman says later. The clock has now taken form on the table before her.

“My father was right.”

She nods. “He was. You have both royal blood and the wild wind-blood of the hills. Blood touched by Aeolius.”

“I’ll throw myself from a window,” I tell her.

The woman bites her lips for a time, as though wondering what effect this would have. Here in this house of dreams, where days run together like clouds meeting in a wind, even such a finalizing action would not perhaps have the intended consequence.

“He would catch you, I think,” the woman finally says.

She looks older. She has aged these past days. Her fingers tremble over the metal face of the timepiece she has fashioned.

“What time is it?” I ask her.

She looks down at it. “Now.”

The clock has figures I do not recognize and far too many hands. Its face is a series of concentric circles like the rings of a tree.

There are fewer workers in the house now. The sound of hammering and chisels on the outer stones has slowed. The house is nearing completion.

The woman is ancient. She sits in front of the clock, mute. Her eyes follow me as I pace the stone floors.

The wizard comes. "It is time."

The old woman nods. She closes her eyes, leans down upon the metal face of the clock, and breaths a final shuddering sigh.

The clock begins to tick.

I watch the wizard watch her and then carry her body beyond the doors of the house. In a few moments he returns with a long blue gown.

"We will wait upon my brother in his palace this night," the wizard says. "You will wear this."

I shake my head.

All the workers have gone. We are alone.

"I speak the word of unbinding," he says gravely, then speaks it. I feel it, prickling like fire up and down my arms. "Your garments will fall to dust." He pauses for a moment. "I will wait outside."

I should defy him. I should flee up the stairs or wait, stubborn and naked, for his return. But I am frightened and powerless, and he said we would be visiting the palace, which means leaving the house. I tell myself perhaps there will be opportunity for escape.

The gown is beautiful, finer than any fabric I have seen before.

The clock has moved to the wall. I did not see it move, but now it is there, beside the door, keeping an inscrutable time.

“You are naked, Sylva Sybila.”

I spin, covering myself, but the voice is only that of the clock. It is not the old woman’s voice.

“Who are you?” I demand, angry and ashamed.

“I am the timepiece.”

I shrug into the gown. “Then what time is it?”

“It is the beginning,” it says.

The wizard steps back into his house. It is impossible to read his face, as it always is. He says nothing, makes no apology, but bids me follow. Outside, we find the same skiff waiting that brought me here.

The clouds around the house are roiling. It seems the house—disguised, I now see, with its outer surfaced carved to mirror the whorls and billows of a cloud—rides at the center of

a cyclone. For a moment I am terrified to step into the boat, but my anger overcomes my hesitation.

I will find a way to kill the wizard. I try to make the words like steel in my mind, forcing myself to believe them. I will escape to my family's valley in the mountain.

The wizard watches the clouds as we approach the wall of white. Before, he stood in the prow and spoke a word to part the walls of cloud, but now he says nothing. They part nonetheless, stretching backward like ribbons of steam, ripping away until the whole tent of cloud collapses, opening like a pale flower and falling away.

The house floats behind us in an empty sky.

The wizard's eyes widen, but he says nothing.

It takes me time to realize the power has come from me. Instead of dwelling on what this means, my eyes run along the curve of the land below us, hungry for green and the ribbons of blue sketched out on it like veins. The landscape is beautiful.

We drop toward Cor Capitolus on the River Is. The city, enclosed in its ivory walls like broken teeth, rises up around us, and we come to rest in a field of short-cropped purple grass in a wide courtyard of the Emperor's palace. I feel the sky above me, tensed and waiting. I can feel it in the wizard as well, his face a mask that seems even harder, more opaque, than before.

Only his eyes are alive. When they glance in my direction I see fear, and my anger falters.

But not enough.

I will kill him, I repeat again to myself, and escape.

I assume we will walk into the palace, perhaps return to the Blue Hall, but instead we move farther into the courtyard. There is a low wall of crimson hedging, and I follow the wizard through an archway of leaves to a circular lawn. The Emperor—his face a mirror of the wizard's—sits at a low table at the lawn's center. Officers stand behind him in uniforms of pink, grey, and blue. Guards line the inside perimeter of the hedge.

"Well met, brother," the Emperor says, smiling with his eyes alone. The officers with whom he has been conversing bow low and fall away.

"Well met, sister," the Emperor says, inclining his head as we approach. "She has passed the test?"

The wizard nods slowly. "I did not bring us through the wall of cloud. It was her anger. It unraveled the cloud-binding completely."

The Emperor raises a single eyebrow. "She is stronger than we thought." He pauses. "Or angrier."

My mind reels, and I can feel the sky tensing again. I think of the old clockmaker and my grandmother. I think of Aeolius dead and bleeding in the hills.

I had done it? With my own strength? With my anger?

“The black cloud?” the Emperor asks.

The wizard shakes his head. “My eyes?”

The Emperor nods.

The wizard pulls from his cloak a tightly rolled parchment.

“Do you know the lands to the south?” he asks me, turning from his brother.

I shake my head. The Emperor eyes the parchment.

The wizard touches the parchment to his lips to unlock it and throws it down on the ivory table before the Emperor, where it unfurls to a surprising size, one end rolling down upon the grass. It is a map, and in the air above it, shapes spring up of dozens of tiny crafts.

“Galleons and city-ships,” the wizard says grimly. “Palaces. Dreadnoughts. The Barons of the south build entire fleets from the gas they harvest in the desert. They war among themselves. They refuse my brother’s sovereignty.”

They seem to be waiting for me to say something.

“Why don’t we crush them?” the wizard goes on, when I say nothing. “Why don’t I call storms down to wreck their wooden fleets?”

The Emperor stirs but says nothing.

“Because it’s not enough,” I venture. I remember what the wizard had said about gods. “Conquest alone is not enough.”

“Because it lacks elegance,” the wizard says. He moves to the map and surveys it with its floating ships as though preparing to sample a banquet laid before him. “Because the Emperor rules by right and by nature, not by force alone.”

There will be no more patrician families, I realize. There will be no more gods in the hills.

“Enough,” the Emperor says. “You have made your point.”

He sighs deeply, a sound like a spring loosening within him. It sounds like the clock in the wizard’s house.

“It is time,” he says. “With your servant, you have the power. I will send you south.”

The wizard’s eyes are hungry. “With my eyes?”

“It will be painful, brother.”

The Emperor stands.

“You may regret it,” the Emperor presses. When the wizard says nothing, the Emperor continues. “Here? Now?”

“You have given your word.”

I can feel it. I will have a moment. Whatever task they bend themselves to will be grim and fraught with power. I can already feel it pricking up and down the back of my arms and legs. I lean into it, letting the wind lick at the back of my neck, letting my anger build slowly.

“Bring water,” the Emperor says to one of the soldiers edging the greensward. “Bring the stones,” he tells another. He

turns back to his brother. “I will call a golem. Only such a one can touch you.”

The wizard nods. His eyes are bright.

“Once I give it the word, it will not cease. Even I will be unable to call it off. When the blade descends, you cannot flinch.”

“It will not happen, brother,” the wizard whispers.

The grass is whispering at my feet as well, bowing toward me. The Emperor and his brother do not notice.

Or rather, the wizard does not. The Emperor looks to me—the glance of an instant—and nods.

He knows. He is giving me this moment to escape.

Why?

A soldier returns, bearing a silver bowl, which the Emperor uses to wash his hands and rinse a long, slender blade he pulls from a sheath at his side. Another soldier brings a bundle wrapped in a golden shroud. What is within is glowing, pulsing, and all attention slides toward it so that we do not see the silver figure, the golem, step from behind the Emperor, half again as tall as he.

There is a dark spot in the heavens, twisting and fluttering like a bird.

It is my black cloud. It is coming.

No one below notices. The stones are unveiled and in the Emperor's hand, the wizard's eyes fastened on them as though they were bits of bread and he a starving man. The Emperor places them in one of the huge hands of the silver figure, the blade in the other.

"You are sure, brother?" he asks.

The wind is growing. The cloud is nearer.

The wizard nods, impatient, his eyes still on the stone. They do not see the cloud or care. It will be upon us, and I will escape. I will break through the crimson hedge around the garden and lose myself in the Capital. I will find a boat perhaps and drift out of the city, down the River Is, and through the broken ivory teeth that mark the wall. I will find my way back to my parents' valley.

And the wizard's wrath will follow.

For a moment my determination falters. The cloud stumbles in the air.

The silver giant grips the wizard by the forehead and leans him back, over his silver knees. The thin blade is close over his eyes. The stones glow.

I bring the cloud, plunging us all in darkness.

The guards cry out, but we are lost to them. I have placed us in a chamber of winds. I can feel them in my veins, rushing

in sympathy with the currents, with the cloud, that I have called down around us.

The blood of Aeolius.

Now is my time to run.

But the wizard is screaming. Beside me in the darkness, someone twists in the grasp of the silver golem and I hear a sick, sucking, wet sound.

A word is bellowed, and the cloud shatters into transparency.

The winds die. My blood quiets.

The Emperor is standing at his throne, his clothes disheveled, his face livid. The anger in his eyes says something has been stolen, that he has been outwitted.

For a moment I do not understand.

Beside me the silver giant is helping the other to stand. The tears on his cheeks are crimson. His eyes are bright and hard. They are stone.

“Peace, brother,” he says, though the Emperor has not spoken.

“You . . .” The Emperor looks at us both, and I fear the anger I see there. “You . . .”

“I see,” the other says. “I have the sight.”

“It was to be mine! You stole it from me!”

Now the guards are around us. Anxious, clustered faces surround the Emperor like planets around a sun. They ignore the wizard and me.

He takes my hand and puts his lips to my ear.

“No more wind,” he says. “Come with me and be free.”

Then I understand. The man at my side is Theodorus, the Emperor. He has stolen the wizard’s sight, and he has left the wizard chained where his fury can do the least damage. The wizard always held the true power, and with his sight and his house he would have held even more.

This was a trap of the Emperor’s devising.

We are halfway across the verdant lawn when his brother’s bellow halts us. His face is a continent of hatred and suspicion at war. The guards watch with confusion, but the wizard knows he is trapped. He must maintain the illusion or fear losing all power in the chaos that would ensue.

“You will leave me here, brother?”

“I am your wizard,” Theodorus says. “You are the Emperor.”

“And her?” He points at me.

“She is as powerful as we hoped.”

He needed me. He needed this moment, and my fury, to betray his brother.

The wizard gives a last glare of anger and sinks to his throne, holding his hand over his soft and human eyes.

“I speak the word of unbinding,” he hisses.

It falls on me like a blow.

* * *

There is a vine of roses growing up the side of the wizard's house. Someone has piled soil into the stone gutters along the wall, and the hungry loam holds rain from the clouds we pass through. I will cut the vine down soon. There are no roses in the clouds.

“We must be invisible,” Theodorus tells me.

But he is Theodulus now. He has stolen his brother's name, as well as his sight, his power, and his house.

The setting sun glances off the walls of the carved house just as it does the true clouds we sail within.

“We fly south,” he says, “at my brother's command.”

“You planned it all along,” I whisper. “You were building this house for yourself.”

I can do nothing more than whisper. The word of unbinding has taken hold. I am losing myself. I try, in the evenings, to hold him, to press my face against his chest, but he slips through me as though I am air. When I cry, the breezes beyond the open windows of the house carry my calls.

Before the winds take us south, I bend them to the north and we pass over the hills of my childhood. Our sheep dot the slopes like clouds themselves, and for a moment think I hear the sound of my father's hammer on stone. We pass overhead, carved of the aeroliths he quarries.

I will not return home a ghost. I will stay with him, in the house he has stolen.

"We must go south," he tells me.

I sigh and let the winds have their way. Soon there will be deserts beneath.

"The Barons?" I ask. "You will conquer for your brother?"

He laughs, but his laughter is sad. "The Barons are nothing. My brother would have destroyed them and missed the greater danger they obscure." His eyes of stone are on the horizon. I can read nothing in them, but they catch the light like diamonds. "The god is coming."

The timepiece ticks on the wall behind us, its dozens of hands sweeping like blades.

We are going to war.

* * *

I lower the scroll and look out the open windows. The land here is carved and broken, with mountains as jagged as the bones of brittle giants. The Emperor has built his kingdom on the back of corpses.

But those gods are long dead.

Sylva has given me the wizard's secret. This was never his house. He was Theodorus, the Emperor. How long did the true wizard fume in his brother's palace, his power broken, his vision snatched away? After his brother's departure to the south, the power of the false Emperor waned and he became simply a figurehead. As the wizard, Theodorus (who I knew by his stolen name) scattered the fleets of the Barons and then slept until I stumbled upon his house in the clouds.

And then he fell to face the unborn god.

The house is mine now. The timepiece speaks to me. The winds would do my bidding, were they but guided.

Sylva has still not returned.

I roll up the scroll and set it in a pile with the others cast down by the storm. Then I speak the word that will return them to their places in the shelves high above. They fall upward like leaves until they are lost in the faint lamplight.

I follow them, my footsteps ringing on the metal of the spiral staircases. There is no end to the measure of the house's height. I could climb for days. The house holds mysteries for a hundred lifetimes.

But I seek only one.

She was waiting for me to finish the scroll, silent and unseen, perhaps in the house itself. She finds me when the

great hearth on the lowest level is only a spark in the darkness below.

“Where are you going?”

“I read it, Sylva,” I tell her. I cannot push her away. Her hands are the breeze on my neck and chest and back. “How you were taken. How you were lost.”

She is quiet.

“The wizard is gone. The Emperor is dead. The house is mine.”

“You are a boy, Diogenes,” she says. “You do not have the power.”

“Not yet.” I reach out a hand but grasp nothing. “I am taking you home. To your family. To your valley.”

“I will not be a ghost for them.” Her voice has moved away.

“You won’t. I will reverse the word of unbinding.”

Her laughter comes from below. “Not even the wizard could do that.”

“I’ll find a way.”

She blows the fire out far below and then is around me again in an instant, pushing me against a wall of woven carpets.

“You are a boy, Diogenes,” she tells me again, forming lips that smell and taste of rain.

I hold her as best I can, a sylph, a thing of air, a twisting form of wind pressed against me.

In the morning she is gone once more. She will not be far. She cannot leave.

But the winds have returned. They answer again to my bidding, and I turn the house into them, back toward the valleys surrounding the Emperor's city, where sheep dot the hills like clouds and patrician families still mine stones lighter than air.

I am taking her home.

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THE UNCARVED HEART

by Evan Dicken

It's hard to tell what someone is really made of, at least until you crack them open. Some have hearts fragile as spun glass, quick to break and impossible to put back together; others have iron in their chests heavy enough to weight the whole of their being. Hearts of diamond, hard but brittle; hearts with tiny cogs, tiny wheels, tiny dials counting down. Only the Volant knew how many they'd carved, or what they did with the old heart when they put the new one inside us. It wasn't our place to ask.

I used to dream of the heart our masters would give me; spend my days sketching rough cordiform shapes in the corners of Father's quota sheets and the backs of letters Mother sent from the front. I'd lay awake at night, one hand pressed over the bundle of meat pulsing behind my ribs and wonder what I'd done wrong. I was sure all the other girls back at the Roost already had their hearts, that the Volant had carved each of them for a special purpose just as they'd carved my Mother, my Father, everyone but me. Uncarved, I was little better than

the native workers we used to harvest nightweed from the sump.

It's funny how flexible memory is, how easily it bends to fit belief.

Izavel didn't look like a spy, didn't act like a killer—I suppose that's why she was so good at it. We used to play together as children. It was forbidden, of course, but Hamaw was far from the Roost and with Mother away fighting rebels and Father, well, being Father, there wasn't anyone to keep an eye on me. I'd slip from the manor, careful to walk with the grain of the speaking grass, past the stockade and its sleepy guards, and down to the sump. It was easy to stay hidden. Those few Carved overseers unlucky enough to draw shift went about masked to keep from inhaling the haze of dead dreams that seeped from the boiling mash tubs. The natives weren't bothered by the fumes. Maybe they were inhuman like Father said, but I like to think since it was their ancestors buried below, the dreams just made more sense to them.

Looking back, it was probably a mistake to give them so much freedom, but there were no Volant about and Father had always been a soft touch. Besides, the people of Hamaw had been quiet for decades. Mother called them *cooked* savages, but like most soldiers she thought about food more than was proper.

There was a stand of mangrove, far enough from the sump that the fumes wouldn't drive me insane but close enough I could watch the natives work. I'd crawl down into the roots with the bugs and muddy water and pretend I was one of Mother's scouts taking notes on rebel movements. That was how I noticed Izavel.

She was about my age, with the burnished copper skin and pale red eyes of an islander, her sun-bleached hair cropped short and her ears just a little too big. She would queue up with the others, moving here and there about the plantation, but when the time came to take her turn at the pumps or tend the fires, someone else would always fill her place. The more I watched, the more I noticed little things, like how her hands weren't rough from straining pulp and her legs were unstained by the mash tubs.

I told Father, but he just waved me off, saying he couldn't care less if this or that child didn't work so long as the nightwine quotas were met. He was half-wild from the stuff already, spending his nights dreaming in the arms of whichever manservant caught his fancy and his days painting pictures that gave me headaches if I stared at them too long. Mother must have known, but she never did anything. Maybe she felt responsible.

It's odd, but I don't remember when I first met Izavel, only that it was boredom that brought me to her.

We used to range barefoot around the Bay of Limbs, scaling stones slick with lichen and bird droppings to peer down at the tangle of arms carved from the rock. Once, I asked Izavel why her ancestors had given the statues hands but not faces, or bodies, or hearts. She looked at me like I'd asked which way was up or where babies came from.

When I pouted, she pretended to raise a bowl of tea, mimicking the way we honored the Volant even though she knew I hated when she did that. "The world is shaped by hands, not hearts."

I pushed her. She pulled my braid hard enough to make my eyes water. There was a chase that ended with both of us breathless in the cool of a fern-shaded lagoon. Izavel showed me how to shinny up the giant broadleaf fronds so they bent low over the water. She trailed her feet in the lagoon, laughing as the fish picked at the skin of her toes. I kept imagining some massive thing rising from below to snap us up like struggling flies.

When I told Izavel, she gave a little shake of her head. "That's the problem with you Carved, you're afraid of everything."

“I’m not Carved, not yet.” I crawled back to the bank. “My Mother is, and she’s not afraid of anything.”

Izavel gave me that look again. “Even the Volant?”

Although I’d never seen one, Mother told stories of when the Volant came—terrible tales of ash and iron, of cities burning while dark winged shadows descended from the sky. She said it was our fault, that Carving saved us from ourselves. There was no tremble in her voice when she spoke, not like when Father described our masters. They both loved them, *everyone* loved them.

It made me wonder what the Volant loved.

“Are *you* afraid of them?” Izavel asked.

“You shouldn’t talk about the Volant.”

“*Are* you?”

“No,” I said. Although I was.

“Good. You shouldn’t be.” Izavel let go of the fern, slipping into the water quick as a minnow. I should’ve known something was wrong, then. For an Uncarved to even mention the Volant was grounds for a beating; entire villages had been purged for disrespectful talk. But I was eight and without benefit of hindsight.

I remember standing on the bank of the lagoon, the sand hot beneath my feet as Izavel glided toward me under the

water, knowing she was dangerous, that I should have her killed, and deciding I wouldn't.

She surfaced before the weight of my choice could really settle, slapping a spray of warm water at me. My outraged laughter shattered the dappled stillness, and, just like that, we were little girls again.

* * *

I remember there being five of them, three women and two men, all rebel chieftains—at least that's what the soldiers said they were. They didn't look like much of anything, chained and covered in mud. Mother had sent runners ahead, and the overseers turned out the whole town to cheer her arrival. The soldiers didn't seem much better than their prisoners—uniforms shredded for bandages, muskets braced against rounded shoulders, the fringes of their helmets lank as wet hair.

Father waited with me in the shade of the winged pillar, his hand heavy on my shoulder. I could feel him sway, tugging me a little each time his balance went. I was fifteen then, and hadn't seen Mother in years. I wouldn't have been able to pick her out except her uniform was cleaner than the others, the lacquered steel of her breastplate bright as a dragonfly wing. As she climbed the steps, I noticed dark stains under her arms and

around her collar, and when she took off her helmet there was blood crusted in her hair.

There was an exchange of formalities—Father's bow like the delicate curve of a saber, Mother's the quick bob of a soldier taking fire. She spared me a nod before turning back to the crowd. I don't remember what she said, only the natives' low hum as the rebel chieftains were forced to their knees.

The lines around Mother's lips deepened. "Why can't they cheer like civilized folk?"

"It's how they show respect," Father said.

"Yes, but to whom?"

"If you wanted cheers, you should've stayed at the Roost."

Mother muttered something that made Father's grip tighten on my shoulder. I must have made a little noise because he let go, the speaking grass whispering as he hurried back to the manor. I didn't look at Mother, but I could feel her gaze on me. When I didn't move, she gave an approving grunt before turning back to the crowd. There were cheers from the soldiers as the prisoners were dragged up the steps and splayed across the altar.

Mother drew her belt knife and drove it into the first rebel's chest, sawing through muscle and bone, then worked her hand into the ragged wound to draw forth the woman's heart. It was an ugly, shapeless thing, all blood and sinew. Pale

scars marred its surface in an aimless scrawl of thoughts and hopes, haphazard as a child's painting.

Mother lifted the heart as if daring me to look away. I would've, but I was searching the crowd for Izavel, desperate to see her face. Two more rebel chieftains died screaming before I found her at the edge of the bare patch of mud between the soldiers and the natives.

Izavel seemed cut from stone, standing motionless as her people swayed and hummed. There was an anxious, almost desperate turn to her lips as she watched the last of the rebels—a man and a woman—even as they watched her. Mother's knife rose, and Izavel met my gaze. Neither of us looked away until it was done.

"Take them." Mother held the hearts out to me, blood dripping from her face, her uniform, everywhere.

It was all I could do not to vomit, my lips thick and wooden, my tongue seeming to fill the whole of my mouth.

"Take them."

The hearts were warm in my hands, soft and tacky with drying blood. This close, their scars seemed less haphazard, more the careful weave of branches than the meaningless flutter of windblown silk. I'd seen the hearts of heroes, wrought of steel and purest gold inlaid with lead to keep them humble. Mother kept a few locked away in her study. Next to them, the

rebels' hearts seemed rough, leathery things. I couldn't imagine how they found the courage to resist us.

We burned the hearts in the great bronze brazier below the winged pillar. Afterwards, there were feasts—one for the soldiers, on long trestle tables in town, and one for Mother, her captains, Father, and I in the manor's hall.

We raised bowls of tea to our masters, draining them as was proper. Father mumbled through the first three courses, sketching bizarre symbols in puddles of spilled soup while Mother sat tightlipped, waving away dishes almost as soon as the servants uncovered them. The officers tried to make small talk, but their attempts were feeble, forced things.

"They say you've started training," Mother said without meeting my gaze.

"Sword, pistol, and wrestling." The words tumbled out. "I've been practicing courtly manners, too, and—"

"You haven't been practicing them," Father said.

I looked to him, startled by the fevered intensity in his eyes.

"You've been *repeating* them." He spoke slowly, as if shaping each word. "You haven't been practicing them because there's no one to practice *with*."

The muscles in Mother's jaw pulsed once, twice. "We decided—"

“*You* decided.”

I glanced between them, wanting to sink down into the soft curves of my sitting pillow.

“What could she possibly learn in Hamaw?” he asked. “This muck-filled graveyard is—”

“Enough!” Mother hammered the table with her fist, plates clattering to the floor. Servants edged from darkened alcoves, bare feet whisper-quiet on the smooth tile. The captains mopped at spilled soup and dripping oil; except for their uniforms and darker complexions, they might have been indistinguishable from the natives.

This time, I did follow Father, snaking an arm around him as he tottered to his feet. He was lighter than I’d expected, his ribs a wicker lattice beneath linen robes. I could feel the rapid flutter of his heart, not a wet thud like mine but the flurry of wings beating against window glass. Mother said nothing as I led him away; only folded her arms, breath loud but slow.

There were a dozen paintings in Father’s chambers. They were all landscapes, but something about the perspective was like spinning around with my eyes closed. I had the servants turn them to face the walls before I laid him down.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I wasn’t made for this.” He laid a cold hand on mine, raising the other to call for nightwine. One of the servants poured some tea, then set a bottle of nightwine

just out of Father's reach. She gave me a little smile, and with a start I realized it was Izavel.

She didn't say anything, only slipped back into the dark.

I rose to fetch the bottle, unable to keep from glancing at the shadows, wondering who else they held.

The nightwine was clear as lagoon water, tasteless but powerful. Our masters downed it by the bottle, but add more than a spoonful to even a large bowl and any Carved who drank would never wake.

I knew Father liked to dilute his with the hot sweetened tea the natives brewed from marrow and cane pulp, so I added a few drops to his bowl. He raised it, then gulped the contents down before settling back into his bed.

"You'd love the Roost." His throat bobbed. "There are winged pillars of silver-inlaid marble so high you can barely see the top. On feast days, they string lanterns between them. There was a tree near the Sunrise Gate, I'd climb onto the wall when the guards changed shifts. It was like looking at a forest of stars."

"That sounds wonderful." I dabbed at his forehead with my sleeve.

"I'll take you there." He looked past me, words starting to slur. "We'll walk the Plaza of Bells, all the way to Enku's Arch and back, and if you see a bell you like, I'll let you ring it, even

though it's not allowed. I cleaned them as a boy, the carillons will remember me."

"And the Dome?" I asked, curious despite the shadows at my back.

"Some bells are so big it takes twenty people to pull back the clapper."

"What about the Volant?"

Father was quiet for so long I thought he'd drifted off to sleep, but when I started to rise he gave a little sigh.

"So many wagons enter the Dome—gold, iron, coal, silk, everything—I don't know where the masters put it all. They say it goes elsewhere, but where else could it go? I was only inside once, when I was Carved, but they made us crawl face down. We all knew the stories of what happened if you looked up."

"What was it like, being carved?"

"It was like..." He ran a hand across his stubble. "It was like falling in love."

Father closed his eyes, breaths easing into the slow rhythm of sleep as the nightwine took hold.

I watched him until the candles burnt low, but the hollow tightness never left his face. He moaned and muttered, calling out names I'd never heard. It seemed a cruel thing to force someone to love something that couldn't love them back, cruel

and powerful. In that moment, I understood why Father feared the Volant.

I left just before the room went dark, bending to kiss my Father on the forehead.

I was glad I did.

They found him dead next morning. Four of Mother's captains had been killed as well, their hearts taken. The officers had scratches on their arms as if they'd put up a struggle. Father had no marks upon him but for the ragged hole in his chest. It made me sad to see him like that. Still, I couldn't help but think death had done what dreams could not and finally smoothed the longing from his face.

Everyone was questioned. This mostly involved beating the servants; a few died. I made a point to walk by the outbuildings, but I didn't see Izavel among the broken bodies. My questioning involved lunch with a round-faced woman in a blue-lacquered breastplate who said her name was Aqat.

She asked if I'd seen anything out of the ordinary, anyone who didn't belong. I remembered Izavel, of course, but I didn't say anything. Aqat told me a couple stories about Mother. I think they were supposed to be funny, but I couldn't imagine my Mother drinking beer from a boot or challenging someone to a duel of open-palmed slaps. Aqat said she and Mother been very close as girls, that she thought of me as a niece. My

surprise must have shown because Aqat looked away, smoothing the wrinkles from her uniform pants with nervous hands. She asked if I remembered anything else. I said no.

Mother doubled the guard and confined all native workers to the village compound, but nothing stopped the killings. Hardly a morning passed without the discovery of a Carved body, their ribs cracked open and their chest empty. Instead of taking the heart from the rebellion, the deaths of their chieftains had inflamed them. The jungle swarmed with natives, patrols went missing. One day, we woke up to see ships burning in the harbor. After that, the crates of nightwine stacked up along the dock, undelivered. Everyone was on edge. We were used to hearing about this sort of thing on the front, but the people of Hamaw were supposed to be cooked.

The old, bent-legged sergeant who'd been training me was reassigned so Mother could see to me personally. I was excited at first, but we never talked about anything apart from fighting and killing. She'd make me lie on my back pinned by sacks of rice and try to worm an arm free, or practice gouging eyes by driving my thumbs into oranges until my clothes were sticky with juice.

It was harder to get away, which made me want to see Izavel even more. I hadn't seen her since the night Father died. Fortunately, with everyone focused on watching the natives, I

escaped now and again. Izavel and I ran through the massive fern groves north of Hamaw, chasing treecats and leaving bare footprints in the thick red clay that washed down from the mountains. We never saw any natives, but Izavel was all secret smiles. I knew she wanted me to ask her about the night Father died. She would drop little hints: asking if I thought his soul had flown back to the Roost or if I would stay when the other Carved were driven off. I didn't answer, not because I was afraid, but because I wasn't sure what the truth would do to me. My heart was still a wild, messy thing even at the best of times.

Sometimes, I would hate Father for not having fought, the anger so unbearable it was all I could do not to tear my curtains and kick holes in the screens next to my bed. Then, I would see a tally sheet with his broad, looping signature and feel like the whole world was pressing down on me.

I knew Mother was sad. They must've etched at least a little love for him into her—delicate filigree on oiled steel—but that had only made her more distant. She would take patrols far out into the jungle, disappearing for days or even weeks at a time. I could see she wanted to leave, but with Father dead there was no one else to watch Hamaw. Soldiers arrived from the Roost and were killed. More came, most too old or too

young. Mother called them Soup Soldiers—tough meat and green vegetables—and her captains laughed.

I tried to be hard like her, but the anger just got worse. Finally, I broke. Izavel and I were at the Bay of Limbs. Low tide had exposed sea caves, and we'd woven torches of dry ferns to give enough light for exploring. At first, the stone hands were little more than textured lumps, fingers worn to nubs by time and tide, but as we went deeper they became more distinct. I squinted at scars and ragged nails, the delicate whole of fingerprints meticulously etched in stone. Each hand was open, fingers splayed like they were reaching for something.

I asked Izavel who they were.

"Everybody," she said. "All the dead, at least."

"That's stupid, souls go to the sky."

"Without wings?" She tapped my shoulders.

"The pyre smoke carries us."

Izavel made a face.

I imagined Father here, the humid dark silent but for the crash of sea on stone. They'd taken his heart. I wondered if he still missed the bells.

It wasn't until Izavel put her arm around my shoulders that I realized I was crying. She kissed me on the forehead then the chin. It was a strange thing, I'd been far closer to her when we hugged goodbye or tried to dunk each other in the sea, but

I'd never been so *aware* of Izavel—her breath on my cheek, the way the hair on her arm tickled the nape of my neck. I kissed her back, on the forehead, the chin, then the mouth. I remember her shivering, but when I drew back embarrassed, she laughed.

“Your lips are cold.” Then she kissed me again.

It went on for a while, but I didn't get bored. Later, I remember wondering if Mother and Aqat ever kissed like this.

“I'm sorry about your Father.” Izavel held me tight, our arms intertwined. “I can get it back if you want.”

“What?”

“His heart.”

I pushed her away, my anger strong as it was sudden. All the unfairness came boiling up and I was screaming at Izavel. My father hadn't hurt anyone, hadn't even wanted to be here. How could they kill him?

Izavel just stared, brow creased, her mouth a little bit open like she had thought she could just mention she'd helped kill my father then go back to kissing. Her surprise lasted only a few heartbeats, and with a curse she was on her feet, nose almost touching mine.

“*Your* father murdered!” she shouted.

I don't remember what else we said, only that she slapped me first. I thought of Aqat's story about Mother smacking a

duelist bloody. That made me smile. It also made me hit Izavel back.

We struggled in the mildewed shadow, torches sputtering on the cave floor. Izavel was bigger and stronger, but I *had* been practicing. She slammed me back, and hard stone fingers pressed into the flesh between my shoulders. There was a moment of sharp pain before the stone arm gave way, sending us both crashing to the floor. I turned as we fell, got my hip into her so I landed on top then went up on my toes to press down like Mother had shown me. Izavel bucked and yelled, first trying to butt my head then to drive an elbow into my ribs.

Without thinking I reached for her face, thumbs pressed to her eyelids. My heart was the crash of waves, blood pounding in my ears, drowning me. Now, I really was scared. I didn't want to be made to feel like this.

I snatched my hands back. "Izavel, I—"

Something hit the side of my head and sent me tumbling. There was no pain, only the stickiness of blood, the chill of wet stone against my cheek. I remember trying to sit up but not being able to get my arms to stop shaking.

Izavel stood over me clutching a cracked stone hand and looking more afraid than I'd ever seen her.

"I'm sorry." She dropped the stone and knelt to press her palm to the cut in my scalp. "Please, I'm sorry."

I slapped her hand away. She curled it to her chest, eyes bright in the torchlight. I wanted her to try again, to take me in her arms and beg me to forgive her.

Instead, she ran.

The moon was high by the time I stumbled back into Hamaw. Mother was out searching the jungle, but the guards shouted with relief to see me.

I was hustled up to the manor, Aqat almost knocking over a screen in her haste to summon servants with bandages and clean clothes. I told her I'd been out climbing in the bay and fallen, but I could see she didn't believe me.

We sat quietly until Mother returned. I don't know what I expected, but she just looked at me, nodded, then left. Aqat went to speak with her, and a little while later servants came to take me back to my room.

I didn't want to cry, but I did.

It was almost morning when Mother came. I think she'd been waiting outside my door for some time, but I was grateful she'd given me time to get myself under control.

"I want a heart," I said.

"We should've had this talk sooner." She sat stiffly on the bed, hands on her knees. "Being Carved is like wearing armor that's too small. You can feel it with every movement, every

thought. It's easy to give yourself over, to trim parts away until you fit."

I opened my mouth, but she raised a hand.

"Let me finish. It was selfish of me, but I wanted you to have a chance to grow wild. That's why I brought you to Hamaw, that's why I stayed away. I should love you, but I can't."

She shook her head.

For the first time, I noticed the grey in my mother's hair, the hollow tightness around her mouth and eyes. I put my arm around her shoulders, the tension in them like a bent bow. Her hand rose, then fell.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't made for this." She stood, smoothing her uniform. "It's too late anyway. You're going to get your heart, daughter. They are coming."

* * *

I was wearing boots when the Volant arrived. It's strange that's what I remember most. I'd worn slippers and sandals before, but it was odd not to feel the ground, only hardened leather, hot and tight. Aqat had an ensign's uniform tailored for me, but the cobbler had been killed months ago and I had to wear a dead soldier's boots.

Our masters came in a ship of white metal, sailless and low to the water like some great ocean predator. There were

masked soldiers, a few hundred at least, their breastplates and shields stamped with a golden heart. They formed ranks upon the beach, parting as three Volant descended.

Mother had always called our masters eagles, but they looked more like vultures to me, tall and crook-necked, heads bare but for a ruff of feathers around their chins. The Volant wore silk brocade embroidered with intricate patterns that reminded me of Father's paintings. From what I could see of their hands and faces they had no skin, just ropes of dried muscle, their eyes lidless and staring. Atrophied wings trailed from their shoulders like tattered cloaks, and there were jewels set into their curved beaks.

They approached us in the little shuffling hops. Mother and Aqat trembled on either side of me, although not with fear. I think it was the first time I'd ever seen Mother smile.

"Failure. Many dead." The lead Volant tilted its head to regard Mother with one eye then the other. "No nightwine."

"I have no excuse."

The Volant glanced to the crates of nightwine still on the dock, swallowed, then looked down at me. I averted my eyes, trying not to wrinkle my nose at the smells of blood and dry rot that slipped through the Volant's perfumed robes.

"Your daughter?" It took my chin in one hand, claws pressing into my cheeks.

“Yes, Master.”

“She can govern Hamaw?” It swayed as it turned my face from side-to-side, tugging me a little off balance.

“If you wish, Master,” Mother said.

“Good. Daughter govern, you fight. Send nightwine, again.”

I knew better than to meet the Volant’s eyes, but suspected if I did I would find in them the same fevered haziness as my Father’s.

I’d wondered what our masters loved. Now I knew.

“There are many rebels,” Mother said. “Far more than we thought.”

“Love conquers all.” The Volant gave a dismissive click, then shuffled off toward the docks.

Mother didn’t want to have a feast, but the arrival of our masters warranted the best Hamaw had to offer. The soldiers sat down to glazed pork and wild rice, while in the manor servants unveiled great platters of smoked fish, spiced vegetables, and shrimp boiled in coconut milk. The Volant sat in Mother’s customary place, relegating her to a seat next to Aqat at the officer’s table. Our masters had shared a bottle of nightwine before the festivities and were clicking and cawing to each other quite happily.

At each place, the servants set a bowl of tea, hot and thick, and we lifted them to the masters. It took some time for them to acknowledge us, but at last one noticed that conversation had ceased and gave an airy wave.

“Don’t.” A hand covered mine.

I glanced up to see Izavel, dressed in servant’s robes as she’d been the night father died. She leaned forward, pretending to wipe an imaginary spill, then glanced at my bowl and shook her head, lips pressed into a tight line.

Around the table the others lifted their tea. I should’ve warned them, but as I looked from Izavel to the Volant, I knew that I didn’t want all this, didn’t want their love, their fear. Every mark in my heart had been put there by someone I cared for—Izavel, Father, even Mother. Wild and painful as it was, it was mine.

Even so, I almost called out, until I saw Izavel’s face, the beginnings of worry lines just starting to bunch the skin around her eyes and mouth, and realized she was afraid, not of the Carved, or even the Volant, but of me, *for* me.

It was cruel to force someone to love something that couldn’t love them back.

As I set the bowl down, I noticed Mother watching me from across the hall. She must have realized the tea contained enough nightwine to drop a regiment, but she said nothing,

only raised the bowl to her lips and drank with the others. I like to think she'd set this all in motion—letting Father mismanage the sump, killing the chieftains, punishing the people of Hamaw, even forcing the Volant to come—that she'd somehow found the strength to hurt something she loved to protect something she couldn't.

I think I remember Mother nodding to me as the bowl slipped from her grasp, then, just before the first slurred cries rang out, pulling Aqat into a tight embrace. I can't be sure, though. Maybe that's just what I want her to have done.

Speaking grass howled with the tread of many running feet, echoed by the shouts of surprised guards. Izavel pressed a knife into my hand as the servants stepped from their alcoves, weaving around the slumped bodies of their masters.

Together, we advanced upon the Volant. Maybe it was the nightwine, or maybe they couldn't believe what was happening, but the Volant just watched us come, their heads bobbing like startled geese.

As the blades fell, I remember wondering if this was the beginning or the end, if the Volant were going to come for us, even if we were doing the right thing. All I knew for certain was that we had the strength and courage to fight.

As for the Volant, we'd just have to crack them open and see.

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By day, Evan Dicken studies old Japanese maps and crunches data for all manner of fascinating medical experiments at the Ohio State University. By night, he does neither of these things. His fiction has most recently appeared in Unlikely Story, Daily Science Fiction, and Flash Fiction Online, and he has stories forthcoming from publishers such as Cast of Wonders and Chaosium. Please feel free to visit him at evandicken.com.

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COVER ART

“Ambush,” by Raphael Lacoste



Raphael Lacoste is a Senior Art Director on videogames and cinematics. He was the Art Director at Ubisoft on such titles as *Prince of Persia* and *Assassin's Creed*, winning a VES Award in February 2006. Wanting to challenge himself in the film industry, Raphael worked as a Matte Painter and Senior Concept Artist on such feature films as *Terminator: Salvation*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *Death Race*, and *Repo Men*, then returned to the game industry as a Senior Art Director for Electronic Arts and Ubisoft. His cover art has been featured in *BCS* twice before, including “Knight’s Journey” in

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Beneath Ceaseless Skies

ISSN: 1946-1076

Published by Firkin Press,
a 501(c)3 Non-Profit Literary Organization

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